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ON PAGE 1B

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# Spies, presidents and an auction

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**T**he letter from the commander in chief to the head of his espionage network was specific. It had advice on the exact methods a new member of the spy ring in New York City should use in transmitting secrets.

The new recruit, known as Culper, Jr., should, the letter said, use codes and invisible ink. At times, he should write his messages on the blank leaves of a pamphlet or almanac so that he might forward them "without risque of search, or the scrutiny of the enemy — as this is chiefly directed against... letters."

Perhaps the instructions were helpful to Culper, Jr., for his work went undetected and he escaped the fate of fellow patriots like Nathan Hale. At his request, his identity was never revealed by his superiors.

Even the author of the letter, Gen. George Washington, never learned the true identity of "Culper, Jr." It was not until 1930 that historian Morton Pennypacker established that he was actually James Townsend, who operated a dry goods

business in British-occupied Manhattan.

The "Culper Spy Ring" letter will join a select group of manuscript Americana and books on the auction block at Sotheby's in New York on Oct. 31. Estimates of the price it will fetch are in the \$25,000 to \$50,000 range.

Among approximately 180 other lots to be offered is a unique check drawn on the Riggs and Co. bank of Washington, D.C. It is made payable to a "Colored Man with one leg." The \$5 check bears the signature, "A. Lincoln."

Thousands of facsimiles of the check were issued in 1899 after journalist Ida Tarbell concocted a mythical version of how it came to be. "It was, no doubt, as he [Lincoln] crossed the park that he saw the colored with one leg," she imagined, "and after listening to his story, gave him the money to help him out of his trouble."

The check bears an authentic Lincoln signature, but it is not the one Lincoln actually affixed on the check. Sotheby's catalog suggests that a bank clerk removed the original signature, and at a later date someone performed a "mysterious piece of restorative surgery," grafting on another authentic Lincoln signature in its place. Sotheby's estimates the check will bring \$8,000 to \$12,000 at the auction.

**R**ivaling the "Culper Spy Ring" letter in terms of expected price (\$30,000 to \$50,000) is a document bearing the rare signature of William Henry Harrison during his one-month tenure as president in 1841. Other items that may bring more than \$25,000 at the sale

include a first edition of Mark Catesby's "The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands: containing the figures of birds, beasts, fishes, serpents, insects, and plants" (London, 1743), and "Travels in the Interior of North America" (London, 1843-4), by Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied.

While the majority of documents in the sale bearing presidential signatures are rather dry, whether personal or formal, a bit of humor is evident in an exchange involving President Harry S. Truman and labor leader John L. Lewis. Responding to a suggestion that Mr. Lewis be named ambassador to the Soviet Union, President Truman said: "I've already appointed a good man to that post and for your information I wouldn't appoint John L. Lewis dogcatcher..."

Mr. Lewis, in a related note, says: "The President could ill afford to have more brains in the Dog Department than in the Department of State..."